

CAROL LEE LORENZO

HER EYES

They arrived in Maine with upset stomachs. Claire's stomach was upset from being in close quarters with Frank for two weeks. She came from a family that didn't touch, except in fury or emergencies.

She lifted her orange-lensed glasses on their thin frames to release their weight from her cheekbones and nose. It had been a long drive and she was a young driver.

Frank was still, head back on the passenger seat, legs flopped open and crammed under the dash, his long neck exposed above his pristine white shirt. When he was drinking he always dressed with immaculate care. He had spent years relaxed through drink. Now he wanted to sober up for Claire. He told her she was his beginning and his last chance, he worried what if it was too late. Drinking that saved him all along had been wearing him out. Giving it up was his idea, not hers.

She'd never been around him sober. She'd known him only a short time, but she knew she'd disarmed him with her breathless, softest, half-sentences giving the briefest history of her life. He'd told his old friends, before he got rid of those that didn't like her, "She's from the South. Who knows what her real history is. They all make up stories down there." Her intriguing mixed signals made him save her from her one-room rental with pallet on the floor.

They'd been in the car for two days, a long drive from the apartment, a stopover in a motel in the dark. She hadn't really driven since her father tried to teach her, with her mother screaming warnings, curses, and directions from the backseat. She'd relearned fast. Once they'd gotten free from the traffic snarl of the city, he'd slept through the daylight—completely unconscious except for the rest stops where he took fewer and fewer sips from a bottle he'd last-minute brought along. She parked the car in old tire tracks in the weedy yard of one of the buildings of the Inn. She slipped her barefeet for driving into her high heels.

His eyes stayed closed but he spoke, "Perhaps you could begin while I get my bearings, Claire." His lashes were short and blonde like his hair and fragile new beard. He'd prepared for this vacation by sunning on the apartment house roof; his scalp had tanned through his hair.

While he'd sunned, Claire had stayed down in his apartment. It gave her the chance to putter secretly through his things.

For her move into his apartment she'd thrown away most of her worldly goods—an incredible collection of odd, old clothes, secondhand or borrowed and never returned. Some still fit her from her childhood.

Frank sat up and stared at the old building, one of several in the woods that made up the Inn itself. They'd received pictures and a map. The main portion and dining room were located down footpaths through the trees.

Claire took off her glasses and put them in a toy-sized purse.

"Don't wait for me to unload, Claire. My feet are still asleep."

The underneath of her hair stuck prickly to her neck. Her hair was dark and straight like a short hood. It had been long and made her look too young. So he'd cut it himself. "I know boys have fooled with you. But how sure are you of not having been with a man like me?"

"I really don't remember," she said.

"You're not exactly a virgin, are you?"

She worked as a hatcheck girl in bars, and clubs. For work, she wore seductive costumes. Otherwise, she dressed in vintage or little girl clothes. Between her small breasts was a small tattoo. A Japanese character that no one could read. She said its meaning changed, depending on how she breathed and how much showed.

He worked in the ups and downs of the garment district, in management, where drinking wasn't noticed, everyone was always either sullen or shouting.

She'd spotted him watching her at the all-night 57th Street Cafeteria. Thin as a weed but she loved to eat. When she first watched him watching her, she was dressed tomboy-style wearing tight jeans and her long hair flying out from under a baseball cap worn backwards, her makeup pale. Her eyes lined thick like she'd used a black crayola. She was one girl in a small gang of boys. He kept passing her table. Finally he approached and told her, "You're a beauty about to break. Let me show you where these games get you with a man. You look like you need saving."

"I do," she said simply and meant it.

Inside the dark hall, the dense veil of her hair swayed to the edges of her eyes. Her stomach felt like it had a pull in it. She stumbled. He stayed below but called out, "If you're having trouble, I'll see for you, Kiddo."

The hall's damp made her old 50's dress smell older. Its silk thin and carbon black, a mourning dress, her mother would miss it. Frank told her, "Age fast, stop looking like somebody's daughter."

Upstairs every door was closed, she listened, no sounds. She found their mailed room number easily, slipped the door open to glimpse a tiny room. She flung her purse toward the bed, it sunk there on a lumpy cover. She hurried back down the hall like she'd run as a child in the dark to safety.

Frank came back up with her carrying his business bag and shaving kit, though his beard was brand new. She brought along the rest of the stuff from the car while he went to the bathroom and put his fingers down his throat.

"Dry heaves," he called out and blew his nose. "In order to sober up, you have to be sick first."

She left the bags against the bed. The window view was thick with tops of deep green pines. Off to the side were shingled roofs like ruffled fish scales, the complex of buildings that the proprietor had described. From the other window, the land curved sharply and dropped toward a shale beach, even the water looked hard.

Frank was busy making noises in the bathroom.

At the dresser, all drawers were empty except one. Stuck. She pulled harder. "Oh," she said. In the drawer was disappointment. "They've left their souvenirs." A small painted rock, a few empty shells.

She avoided the mirror. Her black straight-chop hair and almost white makeup felt like comfort to her, but she didn't like to see how others saw her. Frank sat hesitantly and said, "This mattress feels like it's swallowed bones. God, I'm sobering up."

It was late afternoon. They were in a worn room in the pines, waiting for dinnertime. She wanted to eat new food. The wind switched, rolled the treetops at window level. "You look very large in here," Claire told him.

"Settle," he said. "All that moving makes me feel drunk." She was avoiding the silver eye of the mirror.

"You promised we'd play bugbear," she scattered her laughter and he rose with a groan and chased after her in the clutter. "Don't tickle." She remembered her father's hands. How he cleaned fish. How he wouldn't touch at all, until he was mad, and she remembered her mother's face, ruined, but it healed. She was drowning in her saliva, laughter hurt, she was caged inside hiccoughs, and Frank was saying, "Are you sure you like men? Don't you want little boys instead?"

"Yes, no," she gasped, suspended in giggles. She cried uncle, and he got behind her, his hand caught in a knot of her hair, and they were as joined as intercourse. He stopped playing. She calmed. "You were nice drunk for so many days," she said.

One day, she'd interrupted him from drunk. She wanted to leave. She wanted the boys. His face flamed at her. She'd tried to shut her rented door on him. He'd flung the closing door back. The doorknob had stuck in the wall, locked itself open in her weekly rented room. He told her he'd punish her if she ever tried to walk out on him. She'd never shut him out again. She'd never had anyone else who wanted her that much.

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